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In Camden, New Troubles on Top of Old

By **RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA**

CAMDEN, N.J. — This city closed its dilapidated central library in the 1980s and never provided the money for restoration or demolition. So the landmark building rots on its weed-choked lot, with most of the roof caved in and a large tree growing up through its middle. “It could be a metaphor for the city,” said Jerome Szpila, the city library director.

If so, perhaps the tree is about to fall over. Last week, Camden’s mayor, [Dana L. Redd](#), [submitted to the state a plan to lay off hundreds of employees](#) — possibly more than one-third of the city’s work force, including police officers and firefighters.

Camden has long been a national symbol of urban blight and mismanagement, and for seven years was effectively run by a chief operating officer appointed by the governor, prompting cries of disenfranchisement. But when the [state ended the arrangement](#) this year, any sense of jubilation among residents was overpowered by bad timing.

The state’s reign, which fell far short of its promises to improve this city, ended amid a deep economic slump, and was quickly followed by sharp cuts in state aid to municipalities. Navigating these stormy seas fell to a new and untested leader, Ms. Redd, who was elected a year ago, when the mayor was little more than a figurehead.

Camden drew national attention recently, when officials said this city of 79,000 people [might become the largest in the country without a public library](#) — a threat that was put on hold, though one of three branches closed. But the distress goes far beyond libraries. Ms. Redd, 42, a former councilwoman and state senator, cut the city’s budget by nearly one-quarter, furloughed workers one day a week and warned that every department would send out pink slips in December.

Ms. Redd has called city employees to what promises to be an emotional forum on Monday at City Hall. City officials refused to say how many layoffs were in the plan Ms. Redd sent to the state, in part because they were still trying to reduce the number by squeezing wage and benefit concessions from unions. Last month, the mayor suggested that she might cut as many as 500 of the 1,100 jobs in the city’s work force, including nearly half of its Police and Fire

Departments, but officials now say the figure proposed to the state is lower.

Even so, fiscal watchdogs and labor leaders say that layoffs would certainly be in the hundreds. “We have met with the unions about seven times, and we’re willing to meet with them as much as it takes,” said Marc Riondino, the city attorney. “If there’s concessions, we can back off the number.”

Camden residents are particularly fearful that in a city with one of the nation’s highest crime rates, reducing the number of police officers would clear the field for gangs and drug dealers. “I already tell my kids to come inside to stay safe, and it’s just going to get worse,” said Mariel Sosa, who lives in North Camden.

Helene Pierson, executive director of Heart of Camden, a housing group, said, “I had hopes that Mayor Redd could come into office and really tackle some change, but now it’s a huge challenge just to preserve basic services.”

Mr. Riondino said the Police Department would be reorganized and some functions would be cut, but he insisted that the number of officers patrolling the streets would not decline.

Other city governments in New Jersey are shrinking, but no other community is cutting as deeply as Camden, and none started with greater needs.

New Jersey is among the wealthiest states, but Camden is, by some measures, the nation’s poorest city with more than 50,000 people. It has the lowest median family income, about \$27,000, and the highest rate of families living in poverty: 36 percent. The landscape is pockmarked by thousands of empty lots where abandoned houses have been torn down, and by thousands of boarded-up structures awaiting demolition. Nineteenth-century sewers break regularly and need replacing, but the task is far beyond the city’s means.

In January, with only a few months’ warning, the state relinquished control of Camden two years ahead of schedule, just as Ms. Redd, who declined requests for an interview, was taking office.

Camden depends more heavily on state aid than any other city in New Jersey, drawing more than two-thirds of last year’s budget from Trenton. In June, as the state struggled to balance its own budget gap, Gov. [Chris Christie](#) and the Legislature cut back on municipal aid across the board, particularly money earmarked for the poorest cities.

In response, Camden adopted a \$138.8 million budget, down \$39 million from last year’s, and the mayor warned that even that figure might be too optimistic. Many city workers are fearful — and many spoke about it on the condition their names not be used, lest that put them higher

on the layoff list.

“How am I going to get another job in this economy?” asked a firefighter who believes he will be dismissed. “I can’t even move somewhere else because I can’t sell my house.”

Connie Jackson worked for the city for 17 years before leaving to run a construction company. “These people are scared to death,” she said, pointing to City Hall. “There are people who might lose their homes just with the furloughs.”

Richard Harris, a political science professor at [Rutgers University](#)’s Camden campus, called it “a fiscal calamity,” predicting that city functions including public safety and sewer repair would be undermined.

But City Hall watchers also acknowledge that money is not the only problem in a place where, in the three years before the state takeover, [two mayors were convicted](#) of criminal charges.

“There is a history of corruption, waste, mismanagement, incompetence and [more corruption](#),” said Colandus Francis, who heads the Camden City Taxpayers Association. While the downsizing will be wrenching and some services will suffer, he said, the city could manage on its reduced budget if it were run well. “People got used to the idea that no matter what, the state was going to bail us out. Well, that’s over.”

The takeover is now widely seen as a missed opportunity. [The state invested \\$175 million](#) in Camden, but most of the money went to a few big projects — like expanding a hospital and an aquarium, and building a law school — that were backed by leaders of the Democratic political machine that runs South Jersey. Much less went into neighborhood improvements like removing abandoned houses that shelter drug users and rats.

City expenses rose under state control, but the tax base did not, and contrary to state assurances, the police force shrank.

“It’s not that the things they did with the money were bad, and they did create some good jobs, though not enough,” said Stephen Singer, former executive director of [CamConnect](#), a nonprofit group that collects data to track the state of the city. “But they hardly did anything about these massive needs that you have to deal with to create a foundation for everything else — the crime, the schools. Fixing the sewers alone would have cost much more than the state spent on the entire effort.”

So far, community leaders and people who study local politics are unsure what to make of Ms. Redd. They call her smart and tireless, but they are wary because her political career has been sponsored by the machine led by [George Norcross](#), South Jersey’s most powerful Democrat.

“She was part of the system that put state control in place, messed it up and then took it away,” said Howard Gillette, a Rutgers-Camden professor of urban history. “But she took on an impossible job. We’ll see how she does.”